

## Label babel

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□ A columnist can only investigate the obvious for so long before becoming a mite depressed.

But then you stumble on something that rekindles your faith in science: a bit of research that started out being called pointless, but that has found an invaluable use.

Sound like Sybil's gone soft? Well, consider the story of Greg Kondrak. At first, colleagues sneered at his computer program, which judges whether two spoken words sound alike. Now, his program helps doctors prescribe the right drugs.

Kondrak speaks Polish, English and Spanish, has studied French, German and Esperanto, and might be called a bit of a language maven. As a computer-science graduate at the University of Toronto, Canada, he built an algorithm that automatically codes words into a phonetic alphabet, compares their sounds, and generates a number showing how similar they are.

This topic is of interest to linguists who want to explore whether two languages originate from the same tongue. The program can tell you that father and its Spanish counterpart, padre, sound more similar (and are more likely to stem from the same root) than brother and hermano, for example.

But Kondrak faced a lot of scepticism. Computer scientists said they couldn't fathom something so esoteric; linguists "didn't think it could tell them anything they didn't already know", he says.

Luckily, others were interested.

### Christening games

Drug companies like to select snappy names for their latest elixir. But with so many drugs already out there, new titles frequently end up sounding like old ones. When slip-ups happen - and they do - the wrong prescription can prove dangerous and sometimes fatal.

Erythromycin and Erythrocin. Erex, Eurax and Urex. You get the picture. It's like a Dr Seuss tongue-twister.

The US Food and Drug Administration had to employ a team of people to compare proposed names with a database of existing ones. Now, Kondrak's algorithm does part of the job for them.

Kondrak, who now works at the University of Alberta, says that he feels vindicated - and that his case highlights the need for basic research. "There must be a place where you're free to choose the problem you want to work out. We must defend that," he says.

I can see his point.

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